



Key tenets of programs that successfully engage young people

2024



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Summary

Central to youth work is the notion of soft entry. Effective and proven youth engagement relies on a spectrum of programs and interventions including centre based programs, casework, outreach and drop ins. Soft entry, or anchored service delivery provides young people a safe space, particularly for those young people who have had negative experience with adults and government agencies. It is predicated on the notion that relationship building is central to youth work and is one of the best ways to begin the journey to provide supports and services that are needed for a young person to thrive.

The organisations that took part in the study included Armidale Women's Shelter, Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP), Community Junction, Humanity Matters, Julia Reserve Camden Council, Mountains Youth Services Team (MYST), Regional Youth Support Services (RYSS), Saints Care – Youth Rez.

Most of the organisations that took part in the study had staffing levels between 10-15 employees and the largest team was over 60 staff members. The average turnover of the organisations ranged between \$1-4 million. Two of the organisations were receiving Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) funding while four were receiving Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) funding. The percentage of government funding ranged between 10% to 80% of total funds received.

Most of the organisations were providing direct services to young people and either providing assistance or brokering services for their clients. Most of the organisations talked about similar activities regardless of the type of funding they were receiving. They all talk about creating safe spaces, case management, and individualised support of young people. Participants all talked about the notion of “soft entry” being key to the work they were undertaking.

Young people who took part in the study often talked about very practical supports they received from the workers in the organisations. These often were about life skills and assistance with interactions with government agencies specifically with Centrelink. Young people were very appreciative when the organisation assisted them with employment, whether that be assistance with resumes, connecting with employers or lastly and most importantly, giving them the confidence in themselves to apply for a job.

For the young people, one of their key takeaways was a quick response time to requests, they said that this made them feel respected, they suggested that they looked for a 24-48 hour response time. Safe and inclusive spaces were central for young people and walking them through processes and assisting them to find solutions to their problems. When asked what the organisation does for them, the most common answers centred around food provision and assisting them with navigating governmental systems and filling out forms, and assistance with

employment. They all determined that interactions with the agencies be safe, inclusive and in partnership with themselves.

All of the 8 organisations in this study had similar management styles. This included an open-door policy and permissive environment for staff, linked with an expressed learning environment. The commonality of these agencies was the leaders of each of the organisations often talked about ensuring that their workers were clear about being client centred and that it was important to talk about failure or rather not to fear failure. It was reinforced that fear of failure got in the way of progressing the rights of the young people they worked with. The organisations had at the forefront how they could assist the young people they work with and their internal strategies and contract compliance stemmed from the principles of meeting the needs of young people which were determined in partnership with them.

The most common approaches used across the organisations were: client centred; strengths based; trauma informed; wellbeing framework and culturally safe. There was confusion about rights-based approaches and its terms and whether they apply it – if participants said they did apply it, it was more about being aware that young people have rights. More work needed to be done in the area of working with young people with disability and CALD. Elements that participants thought need to be trained and included in key tenets of youth work included the following: child and youth safety, inclusive practice, community development, and client centred/focused.

Background

The key tenets study was to build upon the work of The University of Sydney, Youth Action, Youth Work NSW and Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) on evidence-based practice: Youth Evidence reviews on Socioemotional Wellbeing and Youth Work: Agency and Empowerment hereafter “evidence review”.

The evidence showed there were gaps in existing research and signalled opportunities to develop new program evaluations and monitoring. The work undertaken by Youth Action with NGOs and government roundtable processes, identified that many programs and approaches were being applied to engage young people. Through the roundtable process, there was a clear consensus that more needed to be done to map and disseminate existing programs but also to identify the key tenets of successful programming with young people in New South Wales (NSW).

The evidence review identified interventions that include core components that foster socioemotional wellbeing, agency and empowerment. However, there was limited understanding of the experiences of young people involved, and the organisational commitment to involve them in program design, delivery and monitoring. Quality evidence gathered by evaluations and quality of service reviews support the work of NGOs by providing a basis for decisions, planning and policy and program reform.

The aims of this study

This program review/study conducted an assessment of the key tenets of successful programs in 8 youth organisations in NSW. Drawing upon rights-based programming approaches, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do organisations use the rights-based approach?
2. Do organisations use core components that foster socioemotional wellbeing and empowerment?
3. What are best practices used in organisations to engage with young people?
4. Are young people involved in program design, delivery and monitoring?
5. Did successful programs value add to government funded programs?

Methodological approach

This comparative quality of service study conducted an assessment of the key tenets of successful programs in 8 youth organisations in NSW through interviews with senior leadership of service providers, frontline staff and importantly the young people who are the recipients of the organisation's programs.

Key study activities

- a) Identify 8 programs from service providers who provided information for the evidence review, have been recognised through the Youth Action's Youth Work Awards, or otherwise been highlighted as providing good practice by Government and Youth Action. Then through the Steering Committee comprised of Thrive International, Youth Action and DCJ, determine the final list of organisations using established selection criteria which included regional balance, and ensuring that organisations worked with a diversity of young people.
- b) Determine a set series of questions for organisations and for young people in collaboration with DCJ and Youth Action. Questions to include whether programs are the core components that foster socioemotional wellbeing and empowerment.
- c) Conduct interviews with each organisation across three different organisational domains – being:
 - a. senior management, including CEO and/or Board members
 - b. frontline staff working on the program or project
 - c. consultations with young people who are recipients of the programs
 - d. if government funded, individual responsible for the oversight of the funding, monitoring and support.
- d) Identify the knowledge throughout the organisation of the program and its approaches, relationship-based work, determine the commitment to these approaches across the organisation, understand what the drivers of the program and its approaches were i.e. if it was a government-funded program or self-funded innovation.
- e) Interview young people.
- f) Test whether the program approaches match experiences from the service recipient group.
- g) Test whether successful programs value add to government-funded programs.

Study governance

A steering committee was convened and made up of representatives of the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), Early Intervention, Volunteering, Youth & Carers, Child & Family, Strategy, Policy & Commissioning, Youth Action and Thrive International. The Steering Committee oversaw the selection of the participant organisations, final approval of questions, review of the interim report and review of the final report.

A panel of experts was convened to oversee the process and final report and ensure that rights-based approaches, inclusive practices, cultural safety plans were in place for First Nations people who were engaging in the program audits. The three members of the panel were:.

John Harding: (Kuku Yulangi/Erub; TSI) John has worked in detention centres on cultural programs, run cultural safety programs, and is currently working on Social Ventures as their lead of First Nations approaches. He is the founder of Ilbjerri Aboriginal /TSI Theatre Company. Since Ilbjerri's inception, John has worked tirelessly in the pursuit of Indigenous artistic expression in the arts and particularly theatre. In recognition of this, John was awarded an Indigenous Fellowship by the Australia Council for the Arts in 1997.

Gill Calvert: the inaugural NSW Children's Commissioner from 1999-2009 and established it as one of Australia's leading children's policy and research centres, one which was built on being child centred and child inclusive. Prior to that she was responsible for coordinating government action for children and importantly refocusing government attention on the importance of the early years. She started her career as a family therapist with troubled children and their families and the importance of listening to children and families experience has underpinned her lifelong commitment to children and their wellbeing.

Andrew McCallum: Experienced Chief Executive Officer with a demonstrated history of working in the non-profit organization management industry. Skilled in Nonprofit Organizations, Social Enterprise, Corporate Social Responsibility, Youth Development, and Government. Strong business development professional graduated from Cambridge Institute of Education UK. Andrew led St Luke's service provider, CEO of ACWA and President of ACOSS.

Youth Safety and Empowerment guidelines

Consultations were held in person and in group consultation methods and were de-identified from the beginning and throughout the whole process.

Young people were asked open ended questions in partnership with the organisation with the primary purpose to monitor or improve the quality of service delivered by the organisation:

The questions were as follows:

- How does organisation X assist you?
- What is the best thing about the organisation or program(s)
- How could the service be improved?
- How are your views listened to in the organisation?

The impact on young people was considered 'low risk' as the questions did not directly illicit personal circumstances and the organisations provided workers for the young people. To ensure best practice about working with young people, part of the criteria for choosing a service provider was that they would provide support before and after the consultation with young people if needed.

Each young person will be provided a copy of the report that contains their feedback which is de-identified.

What young people said

During the study, a total of 86 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in both regional and Sydney locations took part. While demographic details were not always taken at least of the 8% were First Nations, 35% were from a CALD background and 11% of young people identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. While the majority of youth participants took part in group sessions, some interviews were conducted one-on-one with their worker present.

How does the organisation help you? What is the best thing about the service?

Young people often talked about very practical supports they received from the workers in the organisation. These often were about life skills and assistance with interactions with government agencies specifically with Centrelink. Young people were very appreciative when the organisation assisted them with employment, whether that be assistance with resumes, connecting with employees or lastly and most importantly, giving them the confidence in themselves to apply for a job.

One young person talked about their worker doing *“their magic behind the scenes”* in providing them with individual advocacy with government agencies and service providers.

What often came up was the provision of food, whether that be providing a young person with dinner at the premises or providing them with take away provisions that they could use to get through the week.

Young people discussed the importance of the provision of structured activities including days out. There was a lot of discussion and recommendations about what made good activities. Of course, young people said that they wanted to play a part in choosing the activities themselves and in many of the organisations this is what happened.

Assistance with transport, particularly to get to and from appointments, was seen as very important to young people. In doing so, young people said it gained their trust and made them feel as if the worker cared about them.

Young people talk about the organisation being there in difficult times and the one-on-one support for them was extremely important. This in turn assisted the young people to discuss their issues with the worker and enabled the young person to receive the services that they needed. The case worker was often the broker of getting young people into the services that they needed.

For many young people, the role the organisation played in providing friends and opportunities to meet other like-minded young people was one of the key reasons they engaged with the organisation.

When asked what the organisation does for them, many young people ranked providing a sense of belonging as central, by giving them the opportunity to meet other likeminded young people. They stated that this increased their sense of wellbeing and was important for them in confronting the issues and circumstances that arose in their daily lives, whether that be at school, home or in the community. This was particularly stressed by LGBTIQ+ young people.

Observation: How the organisation assists young people they work with navigate governmental systems should be included in the review of service provision. In nearly all the consultations, young people stated that what they needed was assistance in filling in forms and understanding of government processes. Having a dedicated worker or caseworker to assist a young person with Centrelink forms and housing forms was often cited as the best thing the organisation did to assist them.

Observation: It was very clear, particularly in the one-on-one consultations, that the young people were empowered to only share enough of their story to get their point across. They talked about “troubled times” or “bad times”. It was clear that the “case work” had been important to ensure that the young people could liaise within the system and the risk of re-traumatization was reduced.

Characteristics of good youth work

When describing a good experience with a worker, the most common adjectives used were calm, approachable, open minded and non-judgmental.

Young people were often describing a non-authoritarian and inclusive practice that they often described as *“like your friend you know but not your friend”*. Young people spoke about the fact that their worker(s) were the first people that “really” listened to them.

A worker who was patient and flexible with a young person was highly valued. Young people talked about the role the worker played with assisting them to develop their goals. They used terms like *“they were not pushy”*, *“they listened first and then helped”*, *“they walk beside you”*, *“they are there to help me figure things out”*, and *“giving opinions without being shut down”*.

Young people spoke about being sensitive to tone of voice and body language and that this was an important part of them engaging with and trusting workers and organisations.

Young people wanted to make clear the need for face-to-face interactions with workers and organisations. When asked about their preference between face-to-face and online/phone they preferred face-to-face. Many young people said it should not be more than a 70/30 split.

For Aboriginal young people it was important that they were interacting with an Aboriginal worker, when talking about school contexts it was raised that it was sometimes important to have both male and female workers. Connection to culture

was raised an important element for young people to engage and remain with the organisation.

How do I know if the organisation listens to me

When young people were asked how they know the organisation listens to them, the most common answers were the speed at which the worker responded to the young person's request or issue. Most young people said that responding to their request or query within 24-48 hours made them feel heard and listened to. They did not require a resolution of the issue or problem that they were confronted with but feedback about how the request was progressing was important to them.

Many young people used the phrases *"talk to me as a friend"*, *"treated me with respect"*, *"didn't hassle me"*. It was surprising how often young people said that they knew they were being listened to because the worker(s) followed up about their issues and checked in on how they were going.

When the organisation was deciding on activities, they involved young people in the decision-making processes around choosing those activities. Young people also spoke about the ongoing feeling of being listened to and consulted while undertaking program activities whatever they be.

More formal groups within organisations talked about *"everyone has their ideas listened to"*. Young people talked about the provision of training to assist them to providing advice to the organisation.

How could the organisations be improved?

Most young people did not really have any suggestions for improvements other than for more and different activities, although they wanted to make clear that they were consulted on the current activities and were happy with their current ones.

There was strong suggestion from LGBTIQ+ young people that the support workers be a member of the LGBTIQ+ community as they felt it provided a sense of safety and connection. As stated earlier Aboriginal young people talk about the preference and need for Aboriginal workers.

One of the groups spoke about how workers could better integrate the LGBTIQ+ group with the wider community of young people involved in the organisation or service. They suggested that particularly when it came to pronouns, that staff should make the introductions and use the preferred pronouns of the young person – while of course stating this should be checked with the young person first.

Some young people took the time to talk about other experiences that they had with other organisations. They cited a lack of information and not being listened to. They also reinforced the point that other organisations took their time to come back to them and they often never received an answer or update on what they had requested.

In organisations that charged for some of their activities, young people spoke about the cost of these activities and that they could be reduced.

What organisations said

During the course of the study, 8 CEOs or team leaders and 25 front line workers/case workers were interviewed as part of the process.

What does the organisation do?

Most of the organisations were providing direct services to young people and either providing assistance or brokering services for their clients. Most of the organisations talked about similar activities regardless of the type of funding they were receiving. They all talked about creating safe spaces, case management, and individualised support of young people. Participants all talked about the notion of “soft entry” being key to the work they were undertaking.

Key practices of organisations

While there was enormous similarity about the approaches taken by the organisations which will be discussed later in the document, organisations used different ways to express the way they worked.

One organisation used the term ‘addressing immediate needs’. This organisational principle meant that the workers had to listen to the client and address the things that the client expressed that they needed directly. Meeting a client on their terms and at their location was central to many of the organisations.

Taking the time to understand the client and directly asking them what they needed assistance with was an important element for good work, but ultimately this approach enabled the organisations to gain the trust of the young person and therefore was better able to assist them.

The culture of the organisation was very important to see them realise their goals of assisting young people make a better life for themselves. This will be covered more specifically about culture further on in this report but what was common to good practice was management promoting and ensuring the workers engaged with young people professionally, inclusively, and actively listen to the client.

Workers were provided individual sessions on how to better improve their practise in talking to and more importantly listening to young people. This practice was also documented in team meetings and was reviewed with staff about how they went about intake meetings.

The training of staff and having a culture of learning was central to nearly all the organisations. All senior managers, spoke about how important it was to be able to recruit staff in the first place. Some organisations had in place a specific requirement of lived experience for those workers in direct contact with their clients. There was unanimity that it was important for staff to be trained in the key elements of working with young people.

Senior managers spoke about the importance of a culture of learning. They made sure that their staff had both individual and joint supervision meetings. They were often on the lookout for new training opportunities for their staff that was relevant to the day-to-day work with their clients.

Observation: A piece of work that could derive from this study would be a review of intake forms including approaches and suggested ways of interaction with the client.

Observation: The term “case work” has a variety of definitions mostly dependent on what formal training the worker had undertaken. Those who did not undertake a social work degree often talked about individual support for a young person rather than case work. It may be worth renaming this work to better reflect the practice of the workers and give them confidence that what they are doing is in line with government contracts, particularly TEI.

How the organisation involved young people in the design, delivery and monitoring of programs

Organisations involved young people in a variety of ways, but the most common way was to involve young people directly in one-on-one conversations about the decisions that were affecting them. There was a common practice of getting young people to express their opinions and run sessions on goal settings. Organisations discussed that they collated this feedback. All organisations used one-on-one interactions as their primary way to involve young people in the decisions that affect them.

For those organisations that used groups, they were used for a variety of purposes and employed different approaches, but all the groups had at their heart young people having their voices heard and enacted.

Some organisations used the establishment of groups as a program response. In several of the organisations they arranged for young people to come together on a regular basis. Several organisations had LGBTIQ+ groups. For the young people who participated in these groups, it was important that they had a safe space to discuss and talk about the issues and circumstances that affect them.

Two organisations had standing groups of young people to have feedback into the organisations. One organisation had a group of young people who meet on a regular basis and provided feedback to programming. The organisation had a process of two young people from their youth advisory group sit as observers on the Board to give feedback on Board matters as well as give a “youth perspective” on the Board. The Board of this organisation was attempting to do better in providing support for these young people before and after Board meetings.

Another organisation used their reference group in assisting with the development of their strategic plan and they were consulted on the outcomes and measurement of that plan. They also employed annual youth surveys and through engagement with the local schools were able to get large numbers of young people in the process. In

the same organisation, young people talked about the responsibility that they were given particularly around event management which included being provided with a budget.

Particularly around the monitoring of programs, organisations employed a suggestion box and some included young people in the design of that.

Rights based approaches

There was broad agreement that young people had rights and that their organisations operated on the notion that they did everything they could to ensure that their clients were treated with respect. Very few of the participants of the study had learned in their formal training or were provided with an opportunity to learn about a rights-based approach outside the confines of the study itself.

While the participants of the study expressed a strong desire to enable their staff to be trained in a rights-based approach, they were unaware if there was any opportunity to do so outside the confines of this study.

This study accepts that the panel principles as outlined by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission are central to a rights-based approach. The panel principles are of fundamental importance in applying a human rights-based approach, these are participation, accountability, non-discrimination, equality, empowerment, and legality.¹

While participants understood that involving their clients in the decisions that affect them was a cornerstone of the work they undertook, the notion of accountability and non-discrimination were less incorporated into their approaches.

It was less common that the participants understood the four general principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, being Article 3 - Best interests of the child, Article 6- Right to life, survival and development, Article 2- Non-discrimination, Article 12- Right to be heard.

One of the central elements of rights-based approaches is for organisations to play a role in accountability of the duty bearers or more commonly known as decision makers. While participants understood they should be doing more to make decision makers aware of the problems, experiences, and solutions of young people, it was new to some participants that doing so was so central to a rights-based approach.

Key Elements of good practice in youth work

The Research Centre for Children and Families, the University of Sydney, conducted an evidence review on Youth Work – Agency and Empowerment. The evidence review found that many youth work interventions directly or indirectly foster empowerment and agency in young people. The recent shift towards a rights-based approach, and recognition of the need to give primacy to youth voice and

¹ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/human-rights-based-approaches>

participation in decision-making, have seen a number of programs emerge that variously empower young people by safeguarding their rights to participate in the processes that shape youth organisations. While these programs and approaches vary, they converge in their goal of improving outcomes by involving young people in activities considered meaningful, and by promoting equitable relationships and participatory practices.²

The evidence review came up with a list of key elements of good youth work practice. They include the following: youth work ethics, supervision and reflective practice, culturally safe youth work with First Nations youth, rights-based approaches, anti-oppressive practice and trauma informed practice.

Participants of the study were asked to talk about their practice and were then asked for their input into the list of key elements of good youth practice. Set out below is their feedback on each of the key elements from the interviews.

Youth Work Ethics

As outlined in the Agency and Empowerment evidence review, like most caring professions, youth work is underpinned by ethics; a moral code that describes the values in which a group believes. There is no international code of ethics for youth work, however, the Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Workers Associations has developed [Guidelines for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice- external site launch](#). Youth work codes of ethics developed in Western countries are generally drawn from “principle-based ethics” and “character and relationship-based ethics”. The Australian peak body the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition is working towards the national adoption of the [Code of Ethics- external site launch](#) developed by Sercombe in 2002 and endorsed with commentary by Youth Action in 2004.³

Participants were often confused by the term youth work ethics and assumed the term meant that they work in an ethical manner. All participants agreed that working ethically was central to their approaches. Only a few participants understood the term to mean Code of Ethics and referred to a long-standing code that they were using. Some participants talked of the need for training and understanding of “boundaries” in working with young people. They also raised the issue that more needed to be done to train workers about statutory reporting requirements.

Supervision and Reflective practice

As found in the evidence review, as well as in social work and psychology, a youth worker’s ability to reflect on their practice is an important component of good practice. However, it highlights a lack of literature on how to teach reflective skills to

² <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review.html>

³ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

youth workers in training, and points out that supervision or reflective practice can often be de-prioritised in busy practice settings. Supervision is a place for professional development and for working through any challenges that may arise in the context of care work. Supervision provides a space for practitioners to reflect on their work and to think critically about the power dynamic between themselves and the young people with whom they are working. The settings and participants for supervision can vary; supervision can be conducted in a one-to-one setting with a manager or external consultant, in a team or as a peer-led activity among colleagues.⁴

All participants agreed that supervision and reflective practice were key elements of good practice. All organisations used a combination of one-to-one and groups settings to discuss improvement. The leaders of each of the organisations often talked about ensuring that their workers were clear about being client centred and that it was important to talk about failure or rather not to fear failure. Sayfr put it succinctly: “Fear of failure is a common and counterproductive mindset that hampers progress. Systems and controls are often given credit for successful outcomes, while individuals face blame when things go wrong. This imbalance leads to disengagement and a stagnant learning environment.” In line with what Sayfr outlined, participants agreed that recognising the negative impact of this fear, organisations shift their focus from fault-finding to a culture of learning and improvement.⁵

Culturally safe youth work with First Nations

As highlighted in the evidence review, the recognition of culture, workforce development and partnership is key. Multiple authors highlight the recognition of culture as key when working with persons whose culture is different from one’s own. In practice, this requires the development of self-awareness and the ability to reflect upon one’s own culture, beliefs and values. Youth work practitioners are strongly encouraged to learn about the cultures of the persons with whom they work and about the communities where they live and practice. Every young person has different needs, goals, and desires and those may or may not relate to their cultural identity. There are, however, some cultural differences of which youth workers and youth work organisations should be mindful when working with First Nations young people.⁶

Participants of the study all agreed that this approach was key to good youth work practice. Many stated that they were on a journey to improve their practice with First

⁴ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

⁵ <https://sayfr.com/insights/the-fear-of-failure#:~:text=Fear%20of%20failure%20is%20a,and%20a%20stagnant%20learning%20environment>

⁶ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

Nations young people. They thought that cultural safety training was important for their staff and that more could be done to make that more accessible for their workforce. Organisations that were not an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation but had a high proportion of their clients being Aboriginal, discussed the importance of employing Aboriginal staff.

Rights-Based Approach

As outlined by the evidence review, rights-based approaches include enabling children and young people to freely express their views. This means that individual workers and organisations must prioritise authentic and meaningful participation. The evidence review found that for practitioners to incorporate youth participation as a routine and everyday aspect of their practice, youth participation must be a central and consistent element of youth work educational curriculums.⁷

As it is in the evidence review, this is more about participation of children and young people rather than a rights-based approach. This is an important element of undertaking a rights-based approach but is only one of the key elements. As outlined earlier, the key articles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child include four general principles of a child and young person's rights approach, being Article 3 - Best interests of the child, Article 6- Right to life survival and development, Article 2- Non-discrimination, Article 12- Right to be heard.

As discussed earlier, participants were keen to learn more about this approach beyond Article 12, the right to participation. They all agreed that this was important in improving practice.

Anti-oppressive practice

As outlined in the evidence review an anti-oppressive approach is essential to conducting youth work that is just and non-discriminatory. It defines anti-oppressive practice as that which understands “the importance of challenging systemic injustices that have come to be embedded in everyday practices, policies, procedures and thought patterns”. Oppressive systems include discrimination based on gender and sexuality, racism, colonialism, ableism, ageism and poverty. Anti-oppressive practice prompts practitioners to develop an understanding of how the different identities of a person can overlap and intersect to produce different outcomes, the result of which is sometimes a compounding of different forms of oppression. Unsurprisingly, persons experiencing systematic oppression in one or more forms “can experience a significantly diminished quality of life”).⁸

⁷ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

⁸ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

This was the most confusing term for participants and none of the CEOs were familiar with the term and only one of the 23 workers had working knowledge of the term.

Observation: If the Rights-based section of key elements of good youth work practice were to include the panel principles and/or outlined the four general principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), particularly Article 2 of the CRC, then anti-oppressive practice could be incorporated under the rights-based section.

Trauma informed

As outlined in the review, youth work is increasingly targeted towards young people who are classed as 'vulnerable' or 'at-risk'. It follows then, that young people receiving youth work services are likely to have experienced trauma. The impact of trauma on the everyday functioning of an individual is significant. Research has shown that experiences of trauma are effectively 'stored' in the body, which cause measurable physiological changes that can directly affect one's behaviour. When trauma is passed down between generations of a family or community, this is called intergenerational or transgenerational trauma. In the evidence review it highlighted Brokenleg speaking to the impact of intergenerational trauma in the context of his First Nations Lakota community in US.⁹

All of participants agreed that trauma-informed practice was also seen as a key approach. Many of the participants had undergone some form of training in the approach. While there are many definitions of this approach, trauma-informed practice is often described as an approach to working with clients that is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

Other approaches

Strengths-based

The most common element that each organisation thought was central to good practice was strengths-based work. As on the DCJ evidence portal, a strengths-based approach is embracing notions of independence and autonomy among services for young people.¹⁰

A strength-based approach is a way of working that focuses on abilities, knowledge and capacities rather than deficits, or things that are lacking. The approach recognises that children and families are resilient and are capable of growth, learning and change. This also formed a strong part of the culture of the organisation.

⁹ <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-work-agency-and-empowerment-evidence-review/key-elements-of-good-youth-work-practice0.html>

¹⁰ Best practice in youth work interventions (nsw.gov.au)

Embracing notions of independence and autonomy among services for young people was also a key focus.

Person-centred or person-led approach

The NSW Department of Health has outlined a succinct definition of this approach.¹¹ Adapted to the field of youth work it would read something like “A person-led approach is where the person is supported to lead their own decisions as a person first. The focus is on the person and what they can do, not their condition or disability. Support should focus on achieving the person’s aspirations and be tailored to their needs and unique circumstances. A person-led approach: supports the person, at the ‘centre of the service’; to be involved in making decisions about their life; takes into account each person’s life experience, age, gender, culture, heritage, language, beliefs and identity; requires flexible services and support to suit the person’s wishes and priorities; is strengths-based, where people are acknowledged as the experts in their life with a focus on what they can do first, and any help they need second, includes the person’s support networks as partners. A person-led approach should support and enable a person to build and keep control over their life.”

Mental wellbeing or mental first aid

A wellbeing approach was mentioned by nearly all participants and was the term they would rather use than socioemotional wellbeing. It was clear the youth services were often on the front line of working with young people with episodic mental health issues. Given that reality, it may be important to ensure that youth services who are providing services in early intervention are funded and trained to meet this challenge.

Youth socioemotional wellbeing: Evidence review

The evidence review found that socioemotional wellbeing is essential for our overall health and wellbeing. Fostering socioemotional wellbeing in young people helps young people to realise their abilities, cope with normal stresses of day-to-day life, work productively and contribute to their community. The Research Centre for Children and Families, the University of Sydney, conducted an evidence review on programs that foster socioemotional wellbeing in young people aged 10-24. The evidence review adopted a core components approach to identify what these effective programs have in common. The evidence review identified [five core components](#) that foster socioemotional wellbeing: Self-concept, Self-efficacy and confidence; Mindfulness and self-regulation; Prosocial skills and relationship-building; Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change; Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing.¹²

¹¹ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/psychosocial/principles/Pages/person-centred.aspx>

¹² <https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews/youth-socioemotional-wellbeing--evidence-review.html>

The participants in the key tenets study were asked if they used the term socioemotional wellbeing, 85% of the participants did not know of or use the term and the other 10% were deriving its meaning from their understanding of the term.

The participants were then walked through the key core components.

1. Self-concept, self-efficacy and confidence – the vast majority only used the idea of confidence, and the terms self-concept and self-efficacy were not used.
2. Mindfulness and self-regulation – while the terms were open to interpretation of the workers, mindfulness was a deliberate activity of at least 40% of those interviewed. Self-regulation was not a preferred term but around 30% said they agreed with the component.
3. Prosocial skills and relationship building - while prosocial skills were not common with youth workers, they agreed that relationship building was important.
4. Building motivation and monitoring behavioural change – participants agreed that building motivation was important although they preferred not to use language like monitoring behaviour change.
5. Building knowledge and awareness for socioemotional wellbeing – given that there was little understanding of the term, participants did not agree to this being a core component but 90% of workers stated that wellbeing is important as a framework.

The majority of participants agreed that they would rather use a term like wellbeing. While there was no agreement on how that would be defined, an example from Victoria Health is “Wellbeing is not just the absence of disease or illness. It’s a complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. Wellbeing is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction. In short, wellbeing could be described as how you feel about yourself and your life”.¹³

¹³ <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/wellbeing>

Conclusion

The commonality in responses from the participant organisations was a key outcome, particularly around the common approaches needed for good practice in youth work. Successful programs with young people centred around young people feeling respected, safe and heard.

To value add to the good practice, would be further investment in training in the common approaches of youth work including client-centred, strengths-based, trauma-informed, wellbeing framework and culturally safe. Amongst the participants there was confusion about rights-based approaches and its terms and whether they apply it. Developing a rights-based training specifically for the youth sector would go some way to increase awareness and application of a rights-based approach for young people.

In listening to young people how the organisation assists them with navigating governmental systems should be included in the review of service provision. In nearly all the consultations, young people stated that what they needed was assistance in understanding and navigating government processes. Having a dedicated worker or caseworker to assist a young person with navigating government systems was often cited as the best thing the organisation did to assist them.

A further piece of work that could be derived from this study would be a review of intake forms including approaches and suggested ways of interacting with the young people in tandem with the investment in common approaches including rights-based training.

The term “case work” had a variety of definitions mostly dependent on what formal training the worker had undertaken. Those who did not undertake a social work degree often talked about individual support for a young person rather than case work. It may be worth renaming this work to better reflect the practice of the workers and give them confidence that what they are doing is in line with government contracts, particularly the Targeted Earlier Intervention Program.

At the conclusion of the study all the participants were brought together confirm the key findings of the report including the common approaches. A review of the process of the study was undertaken with participants without the consultant. The participants agreed that the period of time the consultant spent in the organisation was particularly important, unlike times in the past when they have been asked to give feedback via a survey or completing a scorecard. This approach allowed greater interaction with staff and young people which flowed more naturally without them feeling a time pressure.

Workers felt the combination of consultation and training was really helpful. They stated that it wasn't a one-way process but rather one that was reciprocal. Participants agreed that when future studies are undertaken that using a person or team with expertise and experience in the subject area was important.

Understanding the complexities of the environments they work in and the context of young people's lives enabled greater exchange and therefore deeper understanding of the work. In turn, they stated that the discussions were extremely validating for them. They gave examples of past negative experiences when interviewers from consulting companies who may have little subject knowledge have been engaged to collect information from them.

The panel of experts reinforced the need for young people to be engaged in studies that looked at the practice of youth work. They raised how important the role of culture was in good practice in NGOs. They reinforced the feedback from participants, of the importance of peer studies – using practitioners in working with NGOs to get greater learnings. They felt that it should be used more in commissioning and review of government funding. They suggested that further work could be undertaken in looking at the comparative advantages of smaller organisations in the provision of youth work.

They also raised the importance of relationship building being central to youth work and was key to good practice. Given that young people raised the issue of needing support navigating government systems and form filling it was suggested that in some instances, particularly with First Nations young people this could be done in the home.

Given the upcoming recommissioning of Targeted Earlier Intervention Program it is timely to consider slight amendments to contracts to better reflect good practice as identified by the participants of the study.

The coming together of the participants also drew attention to more work on “hubs” as a practice model. The notion of soft entry was central to the work of the participants, and it may be time to bring together practitioners to share good practice around location based soft entry programs.

Key Findings of the report

Organisational

Successful organisations all had similar management styles that included the following:

- Open door policy
- Learning environment
- Not fearful of failure
- Client focused
- Determine first how to meet needs of young people and then ensure complying with contract
- Soft entry or Hub models being pursued or rather hubs are central to youth work.

Rights-based and other approaches

The most common approaches used and spoken of were:

- Client-centred
- Strengths-based
- Trauma-informed
- Wellbeing framework
- Culturally safe.

There was confusion about rights-based approaches and its terms and whether they apply it – if participants said they did apply it, it was more about being aware that young people have rights.

More work needed to be done in the area of working with young people with disability and CALD.

Understanding of the term socio-emotional wellbeing

- Little understanding of the term
- Most participants would have used the term wellbeing
- Terms not used by participants self-efficacy, self-regulation, pro-social skills, monitoring behaviour.

Feedback from young people

The key takeaway was response time to requests made them feel respected – 24-48 hours. Safe and inclusive spaces were central for young people and walking them through processes and assisting them to find solutions to their problems. When

asked what the organisation does for them, the most common answers centred around food provision and assisting them with navigating governmental systems and filling out forms, and assistance with employment was key.

“Being treated with respect not being talked down to”

“Hear the problem and problem solve with me”

“Putting up art from young people makes me feel safe”

“They listen and do not interrupt”

“When they just check in and no pressure”

“Peaceful, calm and welcoming is what we want”

“They bring things back up that I have mentioned”

“Sometimes I just need someone to talk to that actually listens to me”

Key Elements of Youth work

- Youth work ethics - people took a literal approach
- Supervision and reflective practice were strongly supported
- Cultural safety with First Nations was strongly supported
- Right-based approach was supported but needed more access to training
- Anti-oppressive practice was not strongly used
- Trauma-informed was strongly supported.

Elements that participants thought lacking included the following: child and youth safety, inclusive practice, community development, client centred/focused.

Key Hacks for youth workers

1. Follow up with young people on what they had raised earlier
2. Open door management style for workers
3. Display artwork of young people and clearly label that it was done by a young person
4. Ask young people what the key things are they want to improve in their lives
5. Ensure that young people have support with their government agency forms and meetings
6. Collate the feedback that workers are gathering in one-on-one interactions and present in staff meetings

7. Hold focus groups with clients about what is working and what is not working with the service at least annually.

Suggested next steps

- Organise a series of in-person and online training for key approaches identified
- Develop a rights-based training specifically for the youth sector
- Organise a round table on the key elements and lessons learnt on hubs
- Review funding contracts, particularly TEI about how they can better promote and reflect better practice as identified by the participants of the study.

Organisations

Armidale Women Shelter

Armidale Women Shelter promotes and maintains a comprehensive range of support services, which may include short-term supported accommodation, for women and children who have experienced domestic violence and/or who are homeless or at risk of experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness. They assist and empower women and young people to secure permanent and adequate accommodation and to maintain independent fulfilling lives free from abuse. They offer a range of practical and emotional support options, counselling as well as referral and advocacy where appropriate. To encourage and support women and young people to assist each other in working through their particular crisis and to offer mutual support, and to help each other realise their potential as independent contributing and fulfilled members of the community.

Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP)

Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP) is the national youth theatre company. They exist to connect young people with the professional theatre industry locally, regionally and nationally. It's the principle on which the company was founded in 1963. ATYP runs theatre programs for young people locally including workshops, writing, in schools, staging productions and touring work.

Australian Theatre for Young People specialises in integrating professional theatre practice with supportive youth theatre process. Working with all levels of the arts industry, from the most celebrated national companies to the smallest youth theatres. Their work supports young people from their first theatre experience to their first professional production.

Community Junction

Community Junction was established in 2015 when three independent local organisations, providing similar services, came together to form one larger service. This enabled a wider range of programs and services to be provided to a larger section of their community.

Community Junction is a local not for profit organisation in Western Sydney providing a range of no or low-cost programs and services, which include Children, Youth, Indigenous and Community programs in response to local interests and needs. From time to time, they have been successful in securing additional funding to provide a specific program. The organisation is governed by a group of dedicated members of the community who form part of their Management Committee

Humanity Matters

Humanity Matters Inc (HM) exists for the use by and benefit of young people aged 12 -18 years of age. Cultural harmony service strives to achieve mutual understanding, respect and appreciation among young people of different cultures

and to be accessible to all young people regardless of race, ability, gender, sexual preference, philosophy, cultural background, health status or class. Welfare / Independence /Empowerment endeavours to improve the quality of life for young people and is committed to assisting young people reach their full potential, through empowerment. Community Appreciation: HM strives to elicit understanding, respect and appreciation of young people by the wider community. They provide support and crisis intervention for young people through youth engagement on the street. Services include street work, outreach with their food vans and individual case management. They also operate a 24-hour front-line responders hotline and call-out service. They provide a youth services hub and advocate and lobby for the needs and issues of young people. They increase community engagement and cohesion through events and activities.

Julie Reserve Camden Council

Julia Reserve Youth Precinct, located in the heart of Oran Park, is made up of a state-of-the-art skate park, basketball courts, parkour training area and youth and community centre. The precinct is a supportive hub for local young people that provides holistic support through the co-location of multiple youth services and agencies. Julia Reserve provides wrap around support for their community ensuring the young people of Camden are supported and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Julia Reserve Youth & Community Centre operates under a co-located model of service delivery with multiple youth services operating from the centre to provide holistic support for local young people.

Mountains Youth Services Team – (MYST)

Mountains Youth Services Team works with young people and families throughout the greater Blue Mountains, including Lithgow and Western Sydney. MYST's mission support vulnerable young people of today and inspire them to reach their full potential and to become the leaders of tomorrow. MYST provide a range of programs and services. These include youth centres, one to one counselling, family engagement, and targeted programs in areas such as Teen Mental Health and resilience

Regional Youth Support Services (RYSS)

Regional Youth Support Services ('RYSS') is a leading, locally based child and youth registered charity and Not For Profit agency, delivering frontline youth support services and innovative engagement strategies to vulnerable young people between the ages of 12 and 25, and their families in communities throughout the NSW Central Coast.

RYSS provides Information, Support, Assessment, Casework and Referral to services. RYSS provides supports across the entire NSW Central Coast and is a point of access for high-quality services, resources and facilities specifically tailored to children, young people and their families, young people with disabilities and those wanting to increase independence, build skills and engage in their community.

Saints Care – Youth Rez

Youth Rez is a program funded by NSW Government Specialist Homelessness Services that supports young people 16-25 years including young parents from the Blacktown, Hills and when needed the Parramatta and Cumberland regions. Youth Rez is the lead organization in providing living skills, brokerage, mentoring, and outreach support to young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in their regions. Youth Rez holds strong networks with other youth services in order to provide a 'no wrong door' approach to collectively contribute towards decreasing the number of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Through a trauma informed, client-centered and strengths-based approach their service ensures a flexible and evidence-based service model that strives to meet the needs of service users and the community.

